

The Glenbanchor and Pitmain Estates' plans for beavers and hill roads?

Description

On 19th August a firm called Caledonian Building Surveyors Ltd submitted a Screening Request ([see here](#)) to Highland Council on behalf of the Pitmain and Glenbanchor Estate Ltd. It asked if an Environmental Impact Assessment was required before they could upgrade and create new tracks and upgrade part of the public road up Glen Banchor *"to facilitate forestry extraction and a conservation project"*.

Bringing beavers back to Glen Banchor?

The brief application form doesn't explain what the conservation project might be, although intriguingly the application form does refer to "Beaver Dam creation". If the Glenbanchor Estate is hoping to save some of the Tayside beavers from NatureScot's licensed culls ([see here](#)) that would be most welcome – even if it will be news to most people that beavers need tracks to create dams!

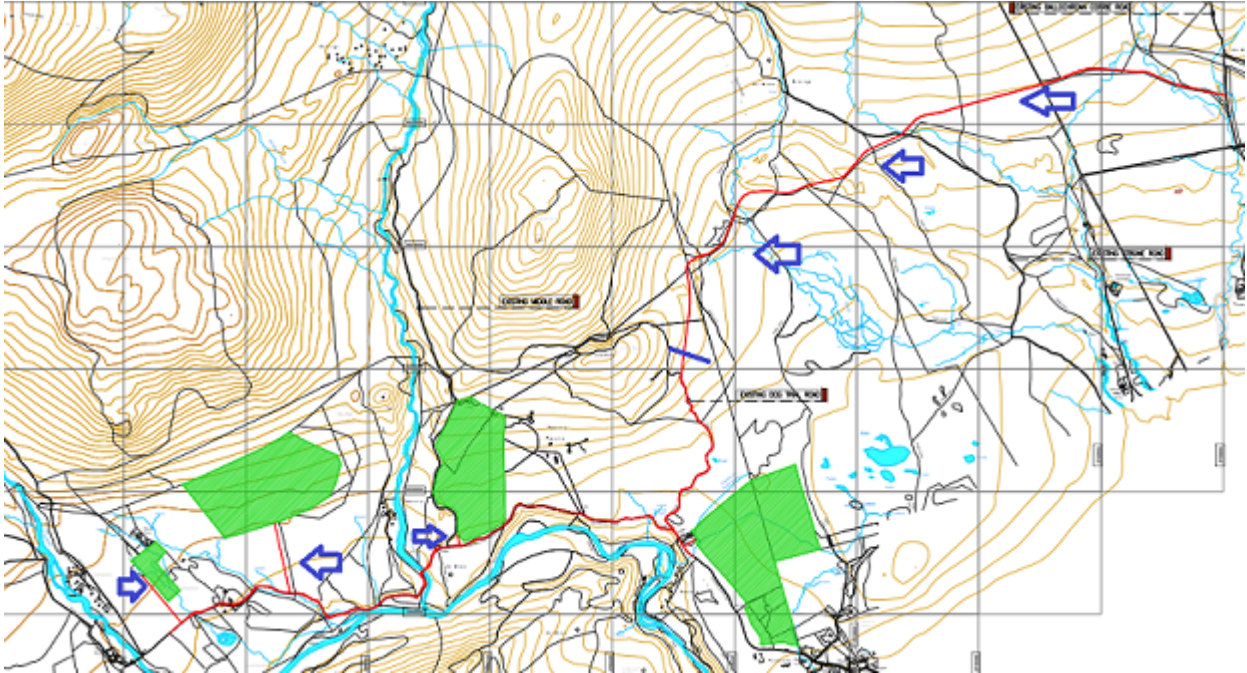
If there are currently enough trees in suitable locations in Glen Banchor to enable beavers to build dams that raises even more questions about NatureScot's financing of three enclosures for tree planting in the glen ([see here](#)). Rather than trying to improve the quality of water in the river at considerable cost by tree planting and importing tree trunks to place across the river bed, wouldn't it have been much better to let nature, in the form of beavers, do the job?

But that would have meant NatureScot – and indeed the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) – being brave enough to challenge the Scottish government's senseless ban on beaver translocation within Scotland, while allowing Scottish beavers to be moved to England.

Whether beavers are re-introduced to Glen Banchor or eventually colonise the glen themselves, their prospects and beneficial impact would be far greater if red deer numbers were reduced. That would allow natural regeneration of woodland up main glen and its side glens and enable beavers to move and build their dams further upstream, reducing water flow into the River Spey below and thus mitigating the increased risk of flooding being caused by climate change.

What road work is proposed?

There are no details of the proposed road work in the Screening Opinion, only a map without a key:



Annotations to the map are in blue. The three arrows on the left point to what appear to be proposed extensions linking the existing track to three blocks of forestry in the glen. The blue line indicates the approximate endpoint of the “dog track” and the arrows above that point to a track that does not exist at present.

The four patches of green appear to show the blocks of forestry where trees are to be extracted and the red line the proposed road. This is highly misleading, making no distinction between the public road and track beyond that, which already exist, and the sections of new road. More specifically, the length of road above the blue line does not exist at present and is not needed for wood extraction. Rather, it appears part of an ongoing attempt by the very rich owner of the Pitmain and Glenbancher Estates to link his two properties with a new private hill road ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)).

That process started with the unlawful bulldozing of a new road along the crest of the fine esker above Newtonmore. After the Cairngorms National Park Authority insisted on a retrospective Planning Application ([see here](#)) and required the estate to undertake extensive restoration work, the road appears better than it did four years ago:



November 2017



July 2021

While the justification for this new road was to facilitate sheep dog trials, it extended beyond the area used for that purpose. Unfortunately the CNPA failed to require the Glenbancher estate to restore that extension and it now could form the first part of the new road that the estate wants to construct over to Pitmain:



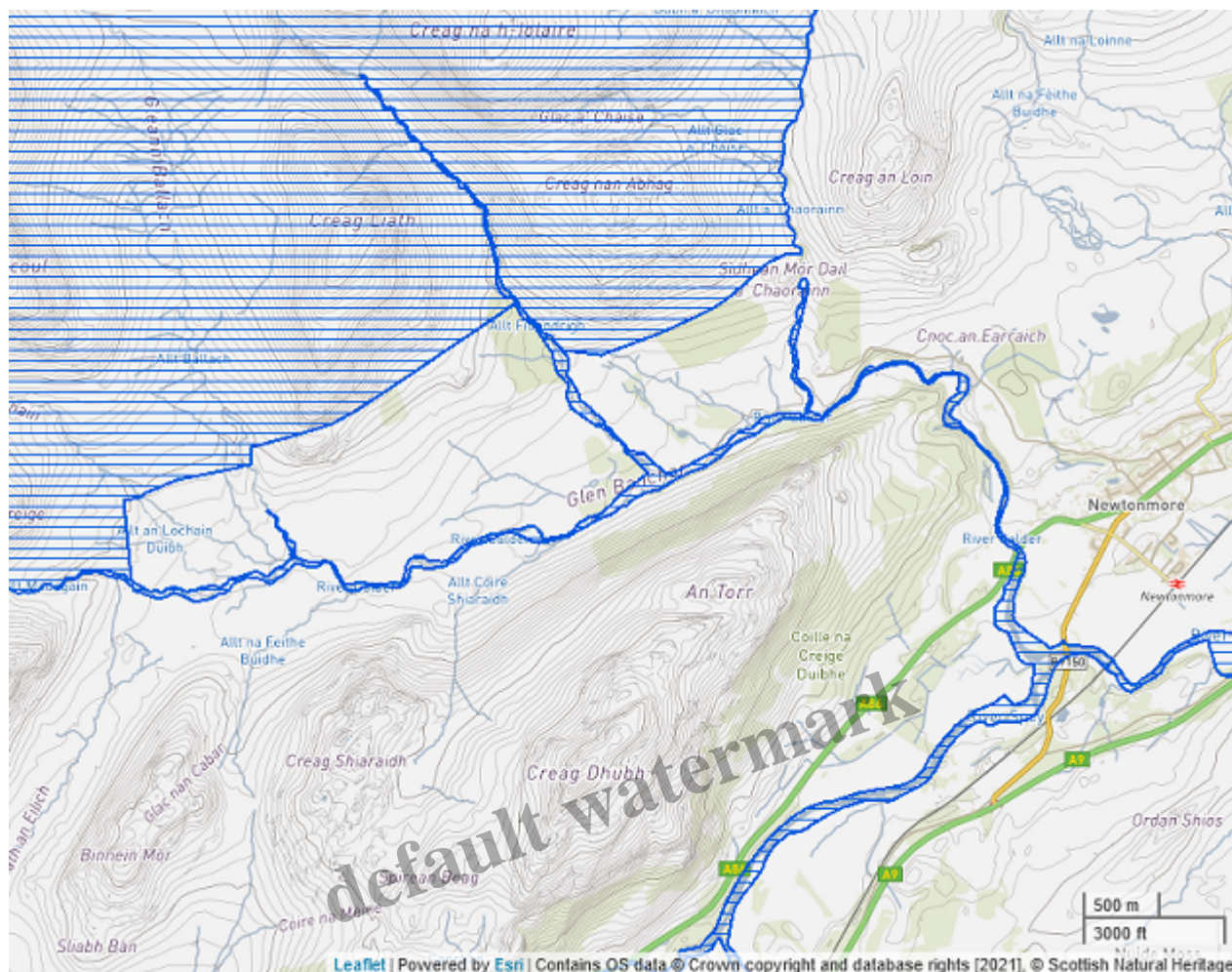
View along the road extension towards Pitmain, with boulders still heaped by its side with little attempt at restoration. Currently the extension ends shortly beyond what is visible in the photo but the map provided as part of the Screening Opinion shows it curving around the edge of the moraine and river terraces to Pitmain. Photo July 2021.

The lesson for the CNPA is cede an inch of new hill road to most sporting estates and they will come back for a mile. A relentless war of attrition being waged against the CNPA's policy presumption against hill roads in their current Local Development Plan.

What needs to happen?

Unfortunately, there is no facility for the public to comment on Screening Opinions in our current planning system and because this is “only” a screening opinion about whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is required, the Cairngorms National Park Authority does not have the right to comment either.

While the application is unclear about what opinion is sought from Highland Council, the most likely reason – given that forest roads are permitted developments – is that their construction could affect the River Spey Special Area of Conservation. This extends up into Glen Banchor but does not cover any of the burns which would be crossed if the road was extended over to Pitmain.



The Drumochter Hills Special Area of Conservation – the large block of horizontal hatching – lies just above the plantations. It is unlikely to be affected by the felling and neither it or the Spey SAC covers the area of the Sheep Dog trial track or its proposed extension over to Pitmain (which lies west of Creag an Loin).

It would be a mistake for Highland Council to let the Glenbanch Estate to get away with presenting unclear plans and do their job for them by concentrating on the risks to the SAC (which won't be anything like those being caused by the repairs to the funicular). Instead, as part of their screening opinion, they should make it quite clear that while any road improvement/creation to the forest plantations would come under the Prior Notification system, the section of proposed road between Pitmain and Glen Banch would need full planning permission.

Meantime, the application for this Screening Opinion adds to the argument that every landed estate in our National Parks should have to produce a single plan about how the owners intend to manage their land. On the Glenbanch Estate peatland restoration and woodland restoration projects funded by us, the public, sit alongside intensification of sporting use and commercial management, both of which drive the construction of hill roads. It is impossible for any member of the public to form an overview of what is going on and my suspicion is that the CNPA in most cases don't know how this all fits together either. That would be a good questions for Lorna Slater, the new Scottish Minister for National Parks ([see here](#)), to ask when she goes out to visit her new charges!

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. climate change
2. CNPA
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